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## Maracucha

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# MARACUCHA

by Lorvelis A. Madueño





El Saladillo in Maracaibo, by Nora Chávez.

## Introduction

I was born and raised in Maracaibo, Venezuela. I moved to New Orleans in the summer of 2014 with my sister, Loraine and her wife, Ruth. Before coming to New Orleans, my sister and I used to live in a small, private urbanization in the Northern side of Maracaibo. It was a very quiet area despite the heavy traffic and big constructions that surrounded it. I have moved twice while living in New Orleans. When we first got here, we lived in Poeyfarre Street in the heart of the Warehouse District. Our apartment was in the third floor of a small building and I had a balcony right outside of my room. Usually, I would wake up really early to watch the sunrise. The mix of orange, red, and yellow in the sky reminded me of Maracaibo.

In the summer of 2016, we moved to a bigger house in Central City. Even though I don't have a balcony anymore, I can still see the sunrise from my window

quite often. I fell in love with New Orleans the moment I got here. It is a very distinct city with delicious food, beautiful landscapes, and amazing people. I believe I could use these same adjectives to describe Maracaibo to a stranger.

By comparing and contrasting my life experiences, and those of my sister, in Maracaibo and New Orleans I wish to offer my perspective, emotions, and thoughts on this geographical and cultural change in my life. I hope that by exploring some of our life experiences, this ethnographic project will shed light on the importance of storytelling for immigrants living in the U.S. I believe all immigrants have stories, and I hope that mine will actually motivate others to share theirs.

## Truth In Pieces of Paper

Maracaibo is the capital of the state of Zulia. Located



Lorvelis and Loraine in June of 2003.

in the northwestern side of Venezuela, it is nationally known as *La Tierra del Sol Amada*, the Beloved Land of the Sun, a title that first appeared on a 19th century poem written by Rafael Maria Baralt, a native of our city. The imagery of Maracaibo is always accompanied by the sun. Throughout the year, hundreds of Venezuelans visit Maracaibo to see the sunrise from Lake Maracaibo, a highly touristic spot. Loraine says:

People in Maracaibo are extremely warm-hearted. We see our friends as siblings. People welcome you in their houses without even knowing you. They give you food, water, and talk to you. There are many things that characterize Maracaibo: People selling fried, salty pastries in the mornings, the smell of *café con leche* in every breakfast spot, and young students eating *cepillados* to combat the heat. I love looking at the houses around the French Quarter because of all the colors, they remind me of El Saladillo. It feels really good to live in a city that resembles Maracaibo in so many ways.

Leaving Maracaibo was a really hard thing to do but,

I consider it the best decision I've ever made. During the first couple of months of 2014, a series of protests began in Venezuela due to the country's high levels of violence, inflation, and food shortages. In Maracaibo, high school and college students started protesting every single day. I used to be a student at the Universidad Rafael Bellosó Chacín (URBE), a private, prestigious university in Maracaibo. I never wanted to join the protests. Several of my friends at URBE that did so were victims of police violence. Instead, I joined a national movement in charge of distributing flyers in buses, schools, and public settings. My job was to design these flyers and send them to students in other cities. The purpose was to inform people about the amount of lives being lost in this struggle. The government censored many TV channels because they broadcasted protests as well as leaders of the opposition denouncing the crimes that members of our own National Guard were committing. For many people in Venezuela, these flyers were the only source of reliable information that they had. Collaborating with journalists, police officers, students, and teachers, we managed to deliver the truth in pieces of paper.

In the month of April, I decided to go back to school. According to URBE's president, our campus was a safe place. When I got there, I was shocked to see that several men, dressed as civilians, were holding up rifles and machine guns. I didn't feel safe at all. Later on that day, I was in one of my classes when I heard gunshots. Soon enough, the smell of smoke infiltrated our classroom. I grabbed my backpack and decided to leave. My professor said, "Everything is going to be okay." No, it wasn't. I quickly rushed to the second story balcony made out of bright red bricks and saw a huge cloud of smoke rising from the plaza behind our university. When I looked down, I saw students running and coughing. Members of the National Guard were throwing tear gas at them.

I couldn't waste any more time. A very good friend of mine, Zam, looked at me with a perplexed expression that I still remember very clearly. I told her, "We have to go, now!" We started running. When we got to the first floor, the National Guard was already inside the



university. We didn't do anything wrong. Why did we have to run? Why did we have to hide?

Our university was a closed campus and by the time we reached the back gate we figured it was shut tight. We climbed over a fence and started running toward the front side of the university. What I saw next has remained in my mind ever since that day. Sometimes, I can still recall the fear that flooded my body. We saw students running, screaming, and being shot at. We were paralyzed. For a moment, I felt like I was in a movie. A couple of men wearing hoodies with their faces covered, realizing our presence, started to walk toward us with knives in their hands. Zam was in a state of complete shock. I grabbed her arm and we both ran as fast as we could without looking back. All of the sudden, her father appeared in his car and we immediately got in. We looked at each other, hugged, and sobbed.

After this event I went back to URBE only once; to drop out. I consider myself a very lucky person. A lot of people in Venezuela have gone through things worse than the one I just described. However, I had the chance to leave. They have to stay and deal with a government that does not care about the people. These protests continue nowadays. Continued shortages of food, inflation, and low oil prices are among the causes showcased in the media. The rights and principles stated in the Venezuelan constitution have been violated over and over and yet the international community chooses not to interfere. Thousands of Venezuelans have no food, no shelter, and no protection. Venezuelan authorities say that only tear gas is used to repress violent protesters. According to them, rubber pellets, ammunition, and torture are never used.

### Marabina/Maracucha Versus White Latina

In Venezuela, people are usually categorized by their *gentilicio*, or demonym, a word that identifies residents or natives of a particular geographic place and is usually derived from the name of that place. People from Maracaibo are called *Marabinos/as* or *Mara-*



houses in El Saladillo, by Nora Chávez.

*cuchos/as*. The difference between these two usually lies in language use: Maracucho/a is usually reserved for people that use slang and bad words all the time. Contrary to Maracuchos, Marabinos are more sophisticated. You're from Maracaibo but your speech is formal. In school, we were taught how to speak formally. I knew that I couldn't address my teachers in the same way that I addressed my friends. While I used *usted*, the formal version of "you" for people older than me, I used *vos*, the informal version of it, for my friends, siblings, and even my parents. Bad words in Maracaibo are used differently than in other parts of Venezuela. For us, they're part of our informal speech. We use them with friends and family alike. In fact, we maracuchos are recognized in Venezuela because of our dialect. People from the other side of the country can hear us talk and identify where we come from. Language distinctions play a huge role in Venezuelan culture and city-built social identities.

Whereas in Venezuela I was different from others because I was a Maracucha, in the U.S. I'm different because I'm white, Hispanic, and Latina. I do not mean to say that racism doesn't exist in Venezuela. Was I privileged? Perhaps. The only instances in which I had to state explicitly that I considered myself white was during surveys and questionnaires given out at school. It wasn't until I got to the U.S. that I was called "white" on a regular basis.

In my Venezuelan university, we didn't have a cafeteria. I had no idea how to get food from the buffet station at the cafeteria. I figured it was self-serve and I grabbed a plate. When I got to the buffet, I realized there was a lady serving the food. I held onto my plate and tried to give it to her:

**Lorvelis:** Hello Miss, can I have some...

**Cafeteria Lady:** Don't give me the plate, I'll give you one.

**Lorvelis:** Oh, I'm sorry, I didn't know that's how it worked.

**Cafeteria Lady:** You think that because I'm black I'm going to poison your plate or something if I touch it? You white people have some twisted ideas about us blacks.

I grabbed my food and walked away. It took me a couple of months to become acquainted with the "one drop rule" and to understand that while in Venezuela we have numerous color categories, in the U.S. you're either white or black. That liminal stage that we call *moreno* and *trigueño* does not exist in the U.S.

My experience with stereotypes has been quite different from yours. People usually think that I'm from Eastern Europe. Not because of how I look, anyone could be from Eastern Europe and have my same skin color. Usually people ask me where I'm from because of my accent. When I reply saying that I'm Latina and from Venezuela they often say that my accent does not resemble that of Latinos/Hispanics. Now, I don't know if this is because most people believe that we all speak English like Sofia Vergara does in *Modern Family*. I feel like there's a big misconception in the U.S. about how Latinos/Hispanics look and how we talk."

## Taking the Bus

Venezuela is a very dangerous country. Our capital, Caracas, has been ranked as the most dangerous city

in the world for the past five years. It wasn't always like that. Growing up, I used to walk to school, the pharmacy, or the supermarket. However, during the last years that I spent in Maracaibo most of my friends got robbed in the streets. Street lights are always broken, the police never shows up when they should, and there is an overall fear of carrying your phone wherever you go. In the 17 years that I lived there, I never took the bus. In fact, I never went out alone, not even to a coffee shop.

Before moving to New Orleans, I did my research. I wanted to know if I was moving to a place safer than Maracaibo. I was shocked when I read that crime in New Orleans was out of control. To be honest, I was scared. I felt paranoid whenever I walked around the French Quarter, Central City, and the CBD.

One day, I heard a girl saying that she used to take the bus every day to come to school and I thought to myself, "Maybe I can do that, too." When I told my sister, she was shocked. Seventeen years without using public transportation and now I wanted to do it. The first time I took the bus, at the stop in Canal and Tchoupitoulas, I realized that a lot of black people relied on public transportation. I was the only white female in the bus. I noticed that most of the black males in the bus were staring at me. Was it because I was a woman? Or because I was white? I really don't know. I didn't feel threatened by their presence. As I got out of the bus, some of them waved at me and said goodbye.

I feel safer in New Orleans than in Maracaibo. Of course, I know that there are certain areas that are more dangerous than others. However, when I remember my last years in Maracaibo all I can think of is feeling scared whenever I went out. I had to take my silver jewelry and my watch off in the street. In Venezuela, you'll get robbed if you don't pay attention to your surroundings. Here, I use normal caution, I don't let my purse dangle from my hand, and most importantly I go with my gut feeling: If it feels sketchy, it probably is. Loraine explains her thoughts on safety:



View of the lake in Maracaibo, by Vanessa Porras Iwasiuk

Being a runner in Maracaibo wasn't easy. I could only run in the park next to Lake Maracaibo because a lot of people went there and it made me feel safe to be surrounded by them. Running in the streets is impossible over there. Here, I can go running wherever I want without fearing that someone is going to approach me and steal my belongings at gunpoint. Of course, I always do this during reasonable times. In Venezuela, no one can guarantee your safety. I can't even remember the last time I saw a police officer around our neighborhood. In Venezuela, I had to park my car in our private parking lot. Here, I park it in the street at all times.

## Defining Beauty

Seven Miss Universe, six Miss World, seven Miss International, and two Miss Earth titles have made Venezuela one of the most famous countries in the beauty pageant world. In Venezuela, beauty pageants are similar to sporting events. Both men and women, children and adults, watch them every year. People

cook, drink, and celebrate in front of the TV every time Venezuela comes up in one of these contests. Venezuela is a country where beauty and external appearance are highly valued by society. The beauty pageant culture has led to redefine what a woman should be and how she should look.

I hit puberty at a young age. I had my first period when I was 11 and my mother made a great deal out of it. She called many members of her family to tell them that I was a fully grown-up woman. I felt extremely embarrassed. I didn't want anyone to know that I had my period because I knew what it meant. The common conception in most families is that if you're "ugly" and "fat" before puberty, once you hit it your body will change and you'll become a beautiful woman. Unfortunately, my father's sudden death in 2006 caused me to develop anxiety and depression. I turned to food whenever I felt sad. While most of my classmates were obviously changing physically "for the best," they had big breasts, a small waist, and big hips, I was considered a chubby, ugly girl. I struggled with self-esteem issues for many years. I was also bul-

lied because of how I looked. I tried very hard to take care of my hair, my face, and my appearance.

Nothing satisfied my mother. In the fall of 2012, after years of enduring physical and emotional abuse, I moved in with Loraine. I started eating healthier types of food and exercising. In a short amount of time, I became a very slim woman. Not surprisingly, my male classmates realized this change in my body very quickly. By the time I was 15, I was considered to be “sexy” and “beautiful.” These comments made me furious. The same people that bullied me and said horrible things were now attracted to me. This is when I understood that in order to be a beautiful woman in Venezuela you have to fit the standards imposed and reinforced by society. Venezuelan women’s bodies are regarded by both men and other women as mere vessels of beauty and sexuality. Loraine and I practiced martial arts for a couple of years and always received negative comments that link back to Venezuelan gender dynamics.

According to Venezuelan society, women are supposed to be delicate. It’s a man’s job to take care of and protect women. Whenever you see a woman capable of defending herself without the aid of a man, that woman is considered to be deviant. As women, we are supposed to do ‘feminine’ stuff like dancing ballet, modeling, or taking cooking courses. Any sort of behavior or act that defies the standards Venezuelan society has for us is seen as a challenge to our culture.

Gender expectations are extremely well defined in Venezuelan society. Women should be submissive, passive, and delicate. Men, on the other hand, are supposed to be rough, dominant, and strict. Venezuelans live in a patriarchal society where machismo is prevalent. Most Venezuelan men will publicly express this machismo toward women with sexual remarks and dirty words that show how important sex appeal is in Venezuelan society. Women are legally equal to men in Venezuela. However, it is not socially egalitarian. College students, professional women, and businesswomen in Venezuela work very hard to look good

and to dress to impress. Loraine recalls what it was like to work with these type of women:

The company that I used to work for valued beauty above talent. In many cases, women would be promoted not because of their achievements but simply because of their looks. I was heavily criticized by my coworkers for being too masculine. I wore security boots because I had to work at an oil platform most of the time. They really thought I could do that in heels. I didn’t exaggerate my makeup, contrary to other women. That was seen as non-feminine, too.

During my second semester at the university in Venezuela, I decided to cut most of my hair and donate it to a local foundation devoted to kids with cancer. After I got my pixie cut, many girls started to approach me and asked for my number. Apparently, I had to be a lesbian because I had short hair. No one really cared about the fact that I cut my hair for a good cause. I wasn’t feminine anymore. I was met with comments such as, “You look like a man,” “That haircut is reserved for lesbians, I thought you were straight,” and the worse one: “This is how you want your family to know you’re a lesbian? By cutting all your hair?” I didn’t cut my hair for the comments or to impress anyone, I did it for myself. However, the amount of hate I received for doing so continues to impress me nowadays. Loraine recalls how she went through something similar the first she cut her hair very short:

Our mother didn’t let me cut my hair. The same day I graduated from high school, I went to the hair salon and got a pixie cut. I remember that she was furious. Besides, I loved watching baseball games and boxing fights very late at night with our father. That wasn’t considered very feminine so she was against it. Also, she didn’t like the way that I dressed. I preferred wearing t-shirts and jeans over dresses or skirts. It was a nightmare for her! I feel like people in New Orleans don’t really care about how you look. In Maracaibo, people stare at you wherever you go. Here, people get annoyed if you look at them. Sometimes I feel like they’re discon-





Arepas, by Vanessa Porras Iwasiuk

nected from the world. In Venezuela there are a lot of expectations about how women should look like. You see hair salons in every corner in Maracaibo. Going to the hair salon here is super expensive. In Maracaibo many of my friends go twice or three times a week! Having long, straight, silky hair is a must in Venezuelan society. That's what beautiful hair should look like over there. If you don't like using makeup, you're not feminine. If you don't like long nails, you're not feminine.

The only instances in which I've felt attacked because of my outside appearance in New Orleans have been due to comments made by other Latinos living here. I believe that these beauty standards are incredibly imbedded not only in Venezuelan but also Latin American culture. There are many expectations about how both men and women should look, talk, and feel.

## Desde Que De Ti Salí

We Maracuchos are extremely proud of our city and our traditions despite all the political, economic, and social challenges we face. In New Orleans, we cook traditional Venezuelan food every week at my house. The fastest and most common Venezuelan dish is called *arepas*. The *arepa* is a flat, round patty made out of corn flour, water, and salt. *Arepas* can be grilled, baked, fried, boiled, or steamed. They're split in half and filled with different types of meat, vegetables, grains, plantains, cheese, etc. When I went to Japan in the summer of 2016 through the UNO Study Abroad program, I took several packets of Harina Pan, the

pre-cooked corn flour used to make *arepas*, with me. One night, some of my classmates showed interest in trying them out. While they ate the *arepas*, most of them started asking questions about Maracaibo and Venezuela. It felt amazing to cook traditional Venezuelan food for Americans studying abroad in Japan. It felt even better to see how food was drawing a connection between our cultures.

Our country has very distinct flavors. Whenever we invite friends over, I like to cook Venezuelan food for them. I feel that it is important to share our culture with our friends in every way that we can. Ultimately, that's what defines us and make us who we are.

Christmas is my favorite time of the year because it is during this time that we listen to *gaitas*. The *gaita* is a style of Venezuelan folk music from Maracaibo. Song themes range from humorous stories about how hot Maracaibo is, our delicious street food, love, protests against the government, and most importantly, religion.

There are hundreds, if not thousands, of *gaitas* dedicated to Our Lady of the Rosary of Chiquinquirá or the Virgin of Chiquinquirá, our patron saint. Maracuchos celebrate her apparition every year in the month of November with parties all over the city. Maracaibo is decorated with Christmas lights, stages sponsored by the government and private companies are set up, and *gaita* concerts are held every week until November 18th. Hundreds of people, from both Maracaibo



Sunset in Maracaibo, by Vanessa Porras Iwasiuk.

and other cities, stay up all night and celebrate in her honor. After November 18th, the *gaitas* continue to resonate until the end of Christmas. I love *gaitas* because I grew up listening to them, to the stories of my people. Loraine explains why *gaitas* are so important for Maracuchos:

Gaitas are very special because they talk about the reality of our city and our country. Government propaganda usually hides a lot of terrible things that happen in Venezuela. *Gaitas*, however, have no filter. They're a tool for people to express their true feelings regarding our struggles and the challenges that we face as Maracuchos and Venezuelans.

I also have a deep appreciation for this music style because my father loved it. The last Christmas I spent with him was full of joy, laughter, and *gaitas*. After

my father committed suicide in January of 2006, I spent several years without listening to *gaitas*. When I look back at that last Christmas with him, I do so with nostalgia but also with joy. Every year, starting on the first days of November, I start listening to *gaitas*. They're a way for me to remember my father in his good days.

*Maracaibo tierra amada* / Maracaibo beloved land  
*Desde que de ti salí* / Ever since I left you  
*A cada instante te añoro* / I miss you every now and then  
*Me paso el tiempo* / I spend my time  
*pensando en ti* / thinking of you  
*Y en mi vibra la esperanza* / And within me there is hope  
*Que a ti voy a regresar* / that someday I will go back to you.